

Theodore Navy Magazine - Tales from the Early Era of Munition Disposal - Part II

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The following is the second in a series of articles by Guest Author [Robert "Dale" Woosley](#) who served at Theodore Navy Magazine, Alabama in the early years following the end of WWII. The first part of Dale's story can be found at [Theodore Navy Magazine - Tales from the Early Era of Munition Disposal \(Part I\)](#).

The work at Theodore included recovery of the brass shells of 3 and 5 inch caliber. The way this was done was to load one end of an ordinary railroad box car with the boxes containing the shells and load a hydraulic press in the middle. We were taken down in a swampy area away from anything and anybody - after the engine had left us. Usually our work crew consisted of 6 men. A couple of guys opened the boxes and took out the single shell in it. Then a couple of guys put the shell in the hydraulic jack and pulled out the projectile and placed it on the floor in the "empty" end of the box car. It would later be disposed at sea. Then two guys would pour the smokeless powder from the shell into a rubber-lined (no sparks) container half the size of a refrigerator, then place the shell in a vertical firing box to fire the primer. The brass shells were brought back to the base, ready to be sold for scrap.

The mosquitoes in the swamp were monsters. It was so hot and humid, we usually worked without shirts and the mosquitoes took advantage. In order to hurry up things and get out of there, we brought an old mattress, put it on the floor in the middle of the car, picked up shells by the nose and hit the base on the mattress, popping out the nose projectile. Stupid, of course, but efficient. Sometimes we ran across a shell which was called a VT or proximity shell, meaning it was meant to explode when it detected the presence of its target. We had to set those aside for an officer to de-activate them. We were scared of those.

When we had accumulated a couple of thousand pounds of smokeless powder, we emptied the rubber-lined drums and made a big pile of powder. Everybody on the base gathered to watch us burn it. One time, we burned too much and blistered the paint on nearby buildings.

Our more hazardous work was when a ship carrying German nerve gas bombs and shells was to be unloaded and the toxic munitions temporarily stored at Theodore and later sent elsewhere. The primary work group came down from Edgewood Arsenal, Maryland (now the Army Chemical Center) but some of our men assisted in the unloading process. It was necessary that each man wear a totally enclosed rubber suit with its gas mask. Because of the heat at that time, working time in the ship's hold was limited to 20 minutes at a time.

Pallets of nerve-gas bombs were taken by rail to an igloo at the Magazine. While around the bombs, we did not wear rubber-suits or gas masks, a dangerous situation. It was rumored that the bombs would be shipped to Pine Bluff, Arkansas or to Dugway, Utah for incineration. I do not remember the day we loaded them for transport, but I knew enough to be concerned about hazards along the way. So far as I know, there were no harmful incidences due to bomb leakage.

Most of the friends I made while in the Navy were made at Theodore. We knew we were not contributing to the war in the usual sense, but we felt we were doing some good and having fun doing it. "Target practice" with a 3 inch gun aboard the ship after work was done was great. It was comforting to be on a base where everybody knew everybody else. There was a feeling of "family". At Theodore, all official Navy practices were followed, but with a friendly attitude of mutual respect and comradeship.

The Navy had huge numbers of what we called "smoke pots". They were containers which would float and give off colored smoke after an igniter was activated. Each one was about the size of a 40-gallon steel drum. We had fun in igniting them, as ordered, and wondering what the local people were thinking had happened. Some of the colors were beautiful. We supposed that they were of the types used in invasion landing operations.